

House Education & the Workforce Committee

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BILL SUMMARY

School Readiness Act (H.R. 2123): Strengthening the Head Start Early Childhood Program

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Head Start is a great program that is capable of achieving even greater results. While the resources to fund Head Start are significant, more work is needed to achieve the ultimate program goal of closing the readiness gap between Head Start children and their more advantaged peers when they enter kindergarten. Studies indicate that children enrolled in Head Start make some progress, but still lag behind national norms in all aspects of school readiness. Data from the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) and the first year findings of the Head Start Impact study suggest that Head Start participants show progress on some measures after completion of a year in Head Start, but not in others, and on balance remain below the national average. These data indicate that in some cases Head Start children are entering kindergarten without the knowledge and skills that are good predictors of later school success.

In addition, a March 2005 report from the independent Government Accountability Office (GAO) warned the financial control system in the Head Start program is flawed and failing to prevent multi-million dollar financial abuses that cheat poor children, taxpayers, and law-abiding Head Start operators. Local media outlets documented more than a dozen instances of alleged financial abuse and mismanagement in Head Start programs across the country from 2003 to the early months of 2005; abuse and mismanagement that may be caused by the lack of strong financial controls in the Head Start program.

To close the readiness gap, address weaknesses in the Head Start financial control system, and strengthen early childhood services for disadvantaged children, Republicans introduced the *School Readiness Act*. The bill, authored by Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) and approved unanimously by a vote of 48-0 by the Education & the Workforce Committee on May 18, 2005, would:

- **Create more competition in the Head Start system.** The bill requires local Head Start operators identified as having one deficiency or more during the five-year grant cycle to compete against other potential grantees when their grants come up for renewal. The U.S. Secretary of Health & Human Services, who oversees the Head Start program, will retain the right to terminate a Head Start grant at any time during the five-year grant cycle. Grantees that meet all requirements will be designated as "priority" grantees.
- **Emphasize "what works" in preparing disadvantaged children for school.** The proposal would strengthen Head Start's academic standards by emphasizing cognitive development and the results of scientifically-based research in topics critical to children's school readiness (including language, pre-reading, pre-mathematics, and English language acquisition). The changes would be similar to those adopted with strong bipartisan support for President Bush's Reading First and Early Reading First initiatives, established in the No Child Left Behind Act for K-12 education. By strengthening the academic components of Head Start and maintaining comprehensive services, the legislation improves upon the good work that Head Start is doing in centers across the country.

- **Better safeguards against financial abuse.** The legislation requires Head Start operators to meet a range of financial disclosure requirements as a condition of receiving and keeping their federal Head Start grants. Grantees will have to be overseen by a local governance board that provides direction and actively oversees all program activities, and will be required to document that they have strong fiscal controls in place, including the employment of well-qualified financial personnel with a history of successful management of public or private organizations. Grantees will also have to maintain administrative costs that do not exceed 15 percent of total program costs.
- **Improve disclosure and transparency of Head Start.** The bill requires all Head Start grantees to make available to the public an annual report detailing how money was spent, the sources from which funds were received, and how the agency has performed in terms of meeting the requirements of the law. An independent financial audit is also required annually.
- **Create a greater role for states in Head Start.** The proposal requires Head Start applicants to have objectives in place for improving school readiness that are aligned with state-developed K-12 academic content standards in order to qualify to receive a federal Head Start grant. In order to be considered “priority” grantees, organizations entrusted with federal Head Start funds will be required to utilize curricula that are aligned with state-developed K-12 academic content standards and based on proven scientific research. Grantees that fail to meet this standard will be required to compete with other potential grantees and will face the possibility of losing their federal grants.
- **Increase Head Start integration with local school districts.** The proposal requires organizations entrusted with federal Head Start funds to demonstrate active partnerships with local educational agencies (local school districts) serving the same communities in order to be considered “priority” grantees. These partnerships are focused on facilitating smooth transitions to kindergarten for their students. Grantees that fail to meet this standard will be required to compete with other potential grantees and will face the possibility of losing their federal grants.
- **Improve teacher quality in Head Start.** The bill would ensure that a greater number of Head Start teachers are adequately trained and educated in early childhood development, particularly in teaching the fundamental skills of language, pre-reading, and pre-mathematics. It would require all new Head Start teachers to have at least an associates degree in early childhood education or a related field within three years, and 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationwide to have at least a bachelors degree within 3 years. These provisions will help to meet a goal set by the National Head Start Association, which called for 75 percent of all Head Start teachers to have at least an associates degree by 2005, and for all Head Start teachers to have at least an associates degree by 2008.
- **Strengthen the role of parents.** Parents have long played an important role in local Head Start programs. To ensure parents continue to have the opportunity for involvement in their children’s early childhood education, the bill not only maintains parental involvement through policy councils, it actually strengthens opportunities for parents to ensure Head Start programs are operating effectively. The bill ensures parents will have better access to information about how their children’s Head Start centers are being run; improves disclosure and requires the board to act in consultation with a parent policy council; and requires Head Start grantees to demonstrate strong parent involvement and establish activities to develop parent skills to support their children’s educational development.
- **Address the unique needs of children in migrant & seasonal and Indian Head Start programs.** The bill strengthens support for the migrant and seasonal and Indian Head Start programs by: directing a guaranteed share of funding to both Indian and migrant and seasonal Head Start while allowing time for a comprehensive analysis to reveal how the populations are being served; ensuring children in migrant and seasonal Head Start programs are making progress in English language acquisition along with all other academic components; appointing a national collaboration director for migrant and seasonal Head Start, as well as for Indian Head Start; and allowing greater flexibility for rural, migrant and seasonal, and Indian Head Start programs to meet staff qualification requirements.
- **Ensure that local Head Start centers are fairly evaluated on their performance.** The bill would eliminate requirements in current law that are arbitrary and do not adequately gauge

children's progress. These flawed measures would be replaced by a more straightforward, scientifically-based system that takes into account a child's progress in key areas relating to school readiness, better enabling parents and teachers to know how each child is progressing.

- **Preserve all current health and nutrition services for Head Start children.** While the academic components of Head Start would be strengthened, all existing health and nutrition-related components of Head Start would be preserved and extended. In addition, the bill increases the emphasis on physical activity and healthy habits for children in Head Start.
- **Require no new testing.** The proposal would maintain current law with respect to regular local assessments of the academic progress being made by children enrolled in Head Start. No new testing would be mandated under the bill. Local Head Start grantees would be subject to the same three-year review ("triennial review") process as they are under current law, but would be evaluated based on criteria that are more straightforward and reflective of the progress being made in preparing children for school. The triennial review has been strengthened by the addition of unscheduled visits, to ensure an accurate view of operations.